PLUM TREE ISLAND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Poquoson, Virginia

ANNUAL NARRATIVE REPORT

Calendar Year 1980

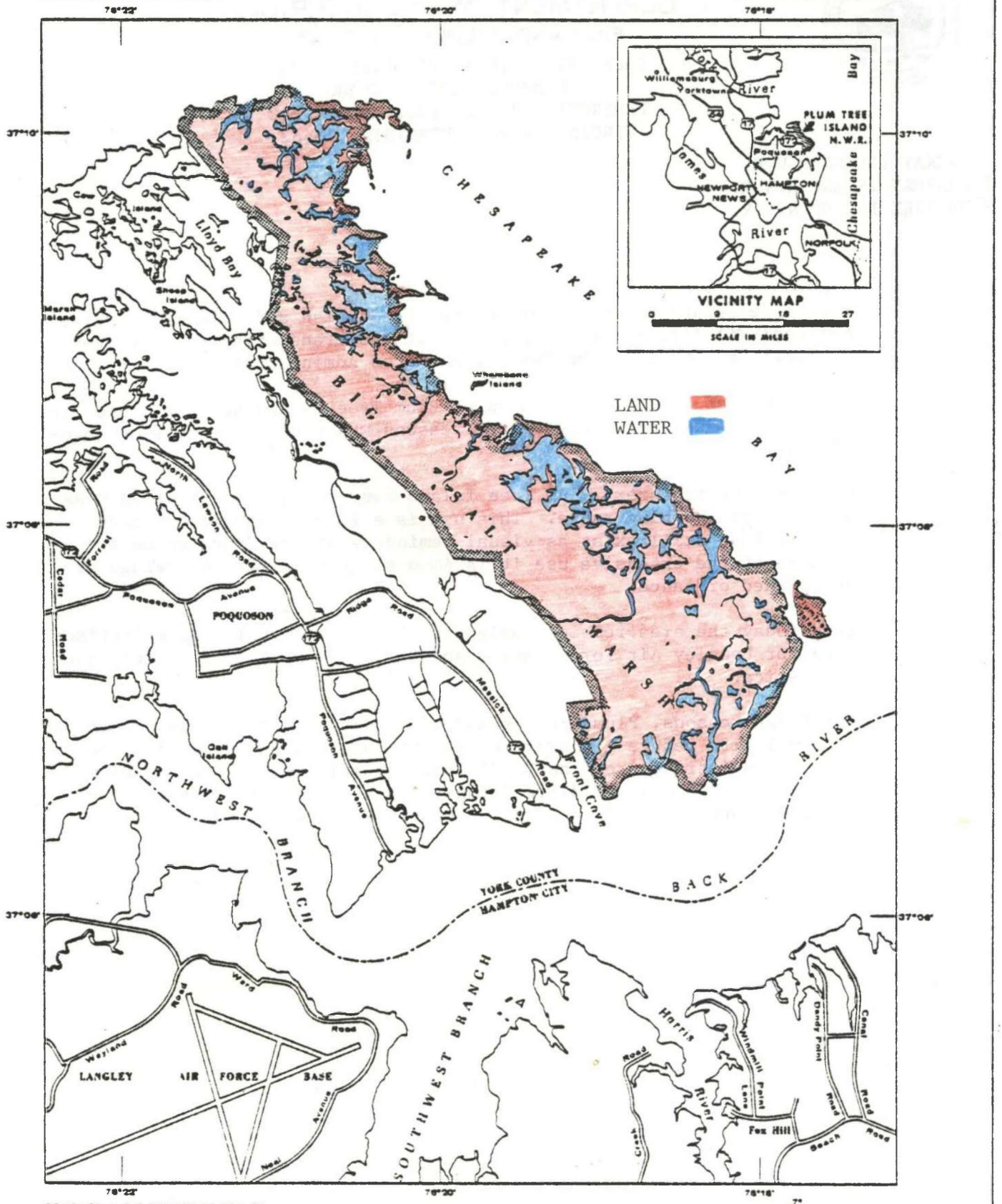
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM
Back Bay NWR Complex
Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

PLUM TREE ISLAND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

YORK COUNTY, VIRGINIA

UNITED STATES-
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

UNITED STATES
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE



COMPILED IN THE DIVISION OF REALTY
FROM SURVEYS BY U.S.G.S. AND F.W.S.

WASHINGTON, D.C. APRIL 1973

5R VA. 842-404

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
BACK BAY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
PEMBROKE OFFICE PARK
PEMBROKE # 2 BUILDING, SUITE 218
VIRGINIA BEACH, VIRGINIA 23462

MACKAY ISLAND N.W.R.
FISHERMAN ISLAND N.W.R.
PLUM TREE ISLAND N.W.R.

Plum Tree Island became a part of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Wildlife Refuge System when it was transferred to that agency on April 24, 1972, by the General Services Administration.

Prior to that time, it was known as Plum Tree Island Bombing Range. This former title explains most of the reasons why public entry is now prohibited.

Prior to the transfer, Plum Tree Island was used quite extensively as an Air Force bombing range. This use is evident today in the many craters that still exist as visual reminders of the previous uses. Because of the extensive use it is impossible to clear the refuge of unexploded ordnance.

Even today the area remains designated as the external stores jettison area for Langley Air Force Base - possibly the busiest Air Force Base in America.

For these reasons, Plum Tree Island will remain as the purists idea of a wildlife refuge - where the wildlife users are completely free from human intrusion on the 3,275 acres of salt marsh known as Plum Tree Island National Wildlife Refuge. Major wildlife present includes marsh and wading birds, shorebirds and waterfowl.

I. GENERAL

A. Introduction

Plum Tree Island is composed of approximately 3,275 acres and is located in Poquoson, Virginia. The island is actually a peninsula of marsh land from the western shore of Virginia into the southern portion of the Chesapeake Bay. Plum Tree Island is bounded on the south by Back River, on the north by the York River, on the east by the Chesapeake Bay, on the northwest by Lloyd Bay and on the southwest by marsh that separates the area from the town of Poquoson, Virginia, three miles to the west.

Due to the area's isolation, this area was never inhabited and was primarily used for hunting and fishing prior to acquisition by the government for an Aviation Experimental Station in 1917. Air Force records indicate that the area was used for a gunnery and bombing range until the latter part of the 1950's. The island was transferred to the Department of the Interior on May 22, 1972. Langley Air Force Base maintains use of the island as an emergency jettison area and a restricted area for explosive ordnance disposal.

B. Climate and Habitat Conditions

1. Weather Conditions

There is no weather station on the Refuge. Weather conditions approximate those at the Back Bay Station.

2. Habitat Conditions

The majority of the area is under tidal influence as tidal flooding occurs twice daily on an estimated 1,000 acres of low-lying marsh. During severe storms and high tides an additional 1,500 acres are flooded. Hundreds of potholes created by intensive bombing dot the marsh terrain.

C. Land Acquisition

Not applicable.

D. System Status

Plum Tree Island National Wildlife Refuge is unfunded, isolated, and unusable by humans. It is treated accordingly.

II. CONSTRUCTION AND MAINTENANCE

A. Construction

Nothing to report.

III. HABITAT MANAGEMENT

Nothing to report.

IV. WILDLIFE

A. Endangered and Threatened Species

The peregrine falcon is believed to make occasional use of Plum Tree as a hunting area. Dr. Mitchell Byrd of the College of William and Mary reported seeing one on the Refuge in December.

B. Migratory Birds

No significant use of Plum Tree by migratory birds has been confirmed, despite some reports of large (300+) concentrations of black ducks. Other species known to use the area include both hooded and red-breasted mergansers, mallard, and bufflehead.

C. Mammals and Non-Migratory Birds and Others

Nothing of significance to report.

V. INTERPRETATION AND RECREATION

Not applicable.

VI. OTHER ITEMS

The island is saturated with unexploded bombs and other ammunition which has made public use virtually impossible. Attempts have been made to clear the island of dangerous ordnance, but only partial success was achieved. A certificate of clearance was issued in 1959 but the island was never certified safe by the Air Force. The marsh interior still contains the more dangerous hardware.

DLP

Plum Tree Island NWR, from the air . . .

RDP

and from the ground